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# My Inner Mask

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*Virginia Commonwealth University*

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## **My Inner Mask**

Documentation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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### **Artist Statement**

My work is comprised of masks. The indigenous power of masks inspires the spirit, energy, and soul of my work. I use masks to reveal my inner self, similar to how masks were used in ritual ceremonies in the ancient past. The masks that I create break the grounds of my physical containment and open the curtains of my creative energy and psychological chaos. They allow me to embrace my vulnerability and my strength.

My work encompasses prints, paintings, and ceramic sculptures. I work expressively by layering the process of mark making in an intuitive manner. Each layer I create reveals an ever-blossoming abstraction. The journey in creating masks has been a cathartic and spiritual experience. My restraints are down and the chaos consumes my mask compositions. It is through this chaos that I can breathe.

# **My Inner Mask**

## **Introduction**

In my earliest memories, my sketchbook was always tucked under my arm. I drifted through the springs and summers drawing the flowers, unsuspecting tourists, and the resident cat in the garden of the Mary Washington House in Fredericksburg, VA, where my mother led tours. Once, she took me to the American Impressionist's, Gari Melchers (1860-1932), studio at Belmont in Falmouth, VA. I fell completely under the spell of art. I knew, even then, that I would always live in the art world.

Through the years, my passion for art grew. As an undergraduate, I studied studio art, art history, and museum studies at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). Then, I began my teaching career as an elementary school art teacher for grades kindergarten through fifth grade. I always wanted to get my master's degree and further my education in studio art. I wanted to become a stronger artist by exploring a wide variety of media and learn from talented and professional art professors. I also wanted to be a stronger and more skilled art educator. I knew that if I furthered my education in the arts, I would be able to broaden my artistic knowledge. So, after two years of teaching art, I officially began my graduate coursework in the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program at VCU.

My areas of concentration were printmaking and craft studies, with painting as an additional focus. I was hungry to get back into the creation of art, and my enthusiasm grew with every challenge. I explored a multitude of processes and ideas that benefitted my own work, and incorporated them in my lessons that I took back to the classroom.

## Aesthetics

I am inspired by the uses and meanings of traditional masks and mask making. Various ancient masks metaphorically reveal a sense of self through the spiritual beliefs and rituals of a culture. For example, the North West Coast Kwakiutl Indians revealed their culture's spiritual beliefs with the combination of animal and human faces employed in their masks. Edward Malin, past Chairman of the Humanities Department at the Pacific Northwest College of Art in Portland, Oregon, stated that the "masks were carved which would allay fears, would serve to provide assurances, and depict spirits as protectors, benefactors, or helpers" (Malin, 43). The combinations of these visual and symbolic elements, of the animal-human, are considered *transformation masks*.

In my work, I explore my own personal emotions and beliefs. I create transformation masks that reveal aspects of my inner self, my subconscious being. I see the human aspect of my masks as a representation of myself, a reflection of what others see. The animal element is a veil for the beast or monster-like emotions that reside in my soul. These beasts reveal the inner anger, pain, and vulnerability that are concealed in my thoughts. I consider them to be representative of my true self.

In my printmaking, I layer my monotypes by continuously adding new imagery on various Plexiglas plates made out of paper stencils, linocuts, paint, and ink. Throughout my layering process, my prints became more and more abstract and broke free from the traditional mask image.

My paintings also relate to the abstracted mask theme. The difference in my paintings is that I incorporated my own face. For example, I painted a self-portrait series where in each work I depicted myself wearing a mask. I morphed the image of my face into a mask. These masks

represented my true identity, revealing my bestial emotions and obscuring my physical face.

I wanted to take my mask ideas to clay. However, I avoided the traditional form of a clay mask with obvious facial features and symmetrical designs. I created my clay masks in an assemblage technique and embarked on a nontraditional approach. First, I threw on the wheel a lot of “ugly,” uneven, big-bellied, asymmetrical, toppled over vessels. I waited until these pieces dried to an almost leather hard state, then began carving and hand building them. I carved away various pieces of clay in each vessel and combined different vessels together. This technique and process helped me create abstract expressions.

I approach my mask making intuitively. I layer prints, assemble ceramics, and paint gesturally to reflect my thoughts and feelings. Like traditional mask making, my process is a cathartic release. Through my process, I express my beliefs, breakdown emotional barriers, and tap into my spiritual self. I spill my demons, energies, and manifestations of my mind through my masks.

## **Influences**

The Kwakiutl Indians of the Pacific North West Coast were an important source of inspiration for me. They typically incorporated dual identities in their masks. In their creation stories, they believed that animals, mythical creatures, and humans were essentially one type of being and the only difference was the makeup of their skin. These beings could transform back and forth from one identity to the other. These identities were analogies for the various natures and characteristics of the forms. I adapted their ideas about dual identities and transformative powers to my own work.

An artist that inspires my work is Jackson Pollock (1912-1956). Pollock was an

American Abstract Expressionist painter known for his drip and splatter paintings. He was also deeply influenced by the mysticism and unconscious powers of Native American shamanism in his work. A shamanistic belief is that everything in the universe is related and connected by spiritual powers. He acted out this idea in his drip paintings by employing a subconscious, automatic ritual of physical spontaneity.

For example, in *Number 1* (1950) (*Lavender Mist*) he employed his spontaneous drip and splatter technique. Pollock placed his canvas flat on the floor, unlike the traditional method of placing a canvas on an easel. Then, he dripped and splattered paint as he moved around and on top of the canvas. He was physically active in his process while he connected each drip and splatter to the next layer. Like Pollock, each layer of my work is in response to the previous layer, connected and related to the next layer. Also, my pieces developed over time through this multi-layer and spontaneous process.

I am most influenced by the spirituality, mysticism, and darkness that are evident in the works of Pablo Picasso (1881-1973). Picasso was a Spanish artist and the co-founder of the Cubist movement. He explored themes, such as violence and terror, and combined them with a visual vitality by using bold lines, angular marks, and rich colors. Early in his career, he was exposed to indigenous masks from various cultures, particularly African masks. For example, *Head of a Sylvette* (1954), *Man with a Hat* (1956), *Seated Woman* (1962), and *Woman's Bust* (1965) are works that reflected aspects of traditional masks. I have studied masks and seen them as a way of making expressive statements. Like Picasso, I incorporated bold, gestural marks and rich colors in my work.

African masks were an inspiration, particularly in my self-portrait paintings. I was drawn to the traditional *warrior helmet* masks found in many regions and cultures in Africa.



Warriors wore these masks during dances in ritual ceremonies. These masks would conceal their human identity and transform them into the warrior spirit (that the masks represents) giving the wearer power and strength for a future battle. Studying these masks and their combination of strength and mysticism influenced my ideas. With each work, I transformed my face into an image of a warrior helmet mask. This was a way for me to symbolically protect my vulnerabilities as well as reveal my need for strength. As Peter Stepan, author, curator, and editor based in Munich, Germany, stated:

In many depictions of animals—more precisely, depictions of spirits in animal form—not only actual species of the bush or savannah may be represented but mythical animal beings as well. This superb capacity of polymorphic expression is a key trait of African art and underlies, like a matrix, all artistic creation on the continent. No dividing line is drawn between the spirit realm and that of human beings and animals; every sphere plays a latent part in flux and continuum of forms. Many configurations include references to the most diverse levels of existence. Beyond this, a large proportion of figures and masks are conceived as embodiments or representations of beings that are truly hybrid (Stepan, 23).

This concept of metamorphosis is closely aligned with the ideas of transformation found in the Kwakiutl masks. Kwakiutl Indian and African masks present hybrid transformations of beasts and humans, express spiritual and cultural ideas, and have inspired artists for generations. I have looked at the histories and the purposes of mask making and assimilated elements into my own work. Similarly, Pollock's approach and outcomes have shown me a more abstract but profound approach to creating transcendent imagery. These objects and artists have ignited my artistic fervor. I feel the presence of these artists as I create my works. I have learned to create my own transformation and warrior mask; I am the shaman of my inner mask.

## **Printmaking**

In my printmaking, I layered imagery on various Plexiglas plates made out of paper

stencils, linocuts, paint, and ink. Through this process, my prints became more and more abstract and diverged from traditional mask imagery. For example, in *Masked Creatures* (Appendix, 1), I used the linocut reduction technique. The process began with carving an image into a linoleum plate and inking the plate in one color. Then, I reduced the original plate by carving into it again. This step altered the overall image and configuration of marks. I re-inked this plate and ran the print through the press again. This process was repeated as I used bright, rich colors of oil-based inks for each layer.

This print was influenced by various masks from different cultures, such as the bird-like facial features inspired by Native American masks. The result was a bright, graphic print that referenced tribal mask making. However, I wanted to achieve a more expressive, complex image and relay the essence of masks rather than a superficial appearance. So, I expanded my approach.

In my work, *Mask and Spine* (Appendix, 2), I tapped into my inner emotional shaman and focused on one layer at a time, without regard for a planned outcome. I first placed a blob of black ink on a Plexiglas plate and ran it through the press. This created a splatter mark on the paper. I then took a smaller rectangular Plexiglas plate and painted a gestural, abstracted face, and ran this through the press on top of the splatter mark. For the next layer, I created cardstock stencils and painted them orange, and ran the paper through the press again. These curved orange marks, positioned in a vertical orientation, reminded me of a spinal column. Therefore, I referenced that feature in the title. As inspired by Pollock, I incorporated splattered paint and approached each layer intuitively. The abstraction that it produced fit with my desire to increase complexity and visual interest through layering.

In my next work, *Abstract Demon Mask* (Appendix, 3), I started by creating another

black splatter mark for the first layer. Then, I made cardstock stencil shapes of circles and ovals. I inked these stencils in bright neon colors of orange, yellow, and green. These intense colors allowed me to create a visually exciting and expressive piece. I arranged them in vertical and horizontal directions on the picture plane. These shapes were inspired by the carving and drawing of eyes in traditional masks. The colorful shapes were printed on top of the irregular, dark splatter marks to infer a sense of mystery and, possibly, danger.

Throughout my prints, I experimented, expanded, and developed a process that helped me relay my emotions in an abstracted manner. My printmaking became a process where I felt more actively involved by responding spontaneously to each layer of imagery. These prints of abstracted shapes and color reveal my inner mask.

## **Painting**

My paintings relate to the abstracted mask theme but also incorporate my own face. For example, I painted a series where I depicted myself wearing various masks. In each painting, I merged the image of my face into a mask. This mask then represented my identity, both revealing and concealing aspects of my emotions. *Masked Self-Portrait of Focused Intensity* (Appendix, 4) marks the first transformation of my face into a mask. I painted this self-portrait in warm colors of reds, oranges, and yellows. I chose these colors to symbolize fire, or the intensity and anger I sometimes feel. I painted my eyes in light blue and my pupils in red to give the appearance of a wild or rabid beast. My face is painted with sharp strokes of vertical and horizontal slashes of paint and reveal the mask as permeating my skin. I also used a palette knife to add texture to my hair that is wild and untamed, like a beast's.

As I moved on to my second self-portrait painting, *The Masked Warrior* (Appendix, 5), I

was drawn to the warrior helmet masks found in many regions of Africa. Studying these masks, and their intent of heroic warrior strength and mysticism, inspired the development. I painted the top of my head with an adorned helmet referencing *Helmet Mask with Female Figure* (n.d.) from Degele, Senufo, Ivory Coast (Stepan, Plate 28). This traditional piece has an elaborate headdress, which I incorporated in my piece. I referenced the sharp and angular female figure in the traditional wooden headdress in my own painting. This female figure on the top of the helmet symbolized strength and endurance to me. On the bottom of my mask, I referenced *Helmet Mask* (n.d.) from Yaka, Democratic Republic of Congo (Stepan, Plate 90). This Congolese mask resembled both a shield and a mask. I used this image to symbolically reveal and protect myself. I chose a gray tone for my skin color to present myself as a strong and stoic statue—standing against the odds. However, the red coloration in my lips, cheeks, and eyelids are meant to reveal the humanity and fragility resonating within my body. In this painting, I am embracing my inner warrior to combat hurt and to give me strength.

The third painting in this series is *Ram's 2 Faces of Fragility and Protection* (Appendix, 6). This time, I used an African mask *Double-Headed Helmet Crest* (n.d.) of Boki, Nigeria as inspiration (Stepan, Plate 63). The Nigerian mask presents two faces, which are traditionally of the faces of rival tribes and defeated enemies. The faces are adorned with long horns, which were intended to symbolize human hair (Stepan, 170). The faces are attached to each other facing opposite directions. In my piece, I painted horns in contrasting blue tones against oranges, reds, and yellows to emphasize the sharp edges of the horns. Instead of referencing hair, my downward-facing horns symbolize my battle-worn and defeated soul. I painted spiraled horns around the neck area to symbolize a choking hurt and growing emotional hardness. I used these symbols as a metaphor for the opposing aspects of vulnerability and strength. This double

mask also reflects my physical face and my emotional face.

My self-portrait series brought me to a new level of openness as I revealed my own face and my inner self. Through this process, and with each paint stroke, I traveled to a vulnerable and intense place in my thoughts. I felt the need to shield my emotions as I ventured into the media of clay.

## **Ceramics**

Through my clay ceramic sculptures, I withdrew from my own physical identification and made a variety of masks with their own unique personalities. I wanted to avoid the traditional form of a clay mask with obvious facial features and symmetrical designs. So, I decided to create them in an assemblage technique and embarked on a nontraditional approach.

My general process is similar in each ceramic piece I make. First, I throw on the wheel a lot of big-bellied, asymmetrical, and toppled over vessels. I leave them open-ended so that the vessels can dry faster and be lighter in weight. I wait until these pieces are dried to an almost leather hard state, then I begin carving and hand building them. I carve away various pieces of clay in each vessel and recombine different vessels together. I deconstruct and re-construct my forms to make assembled, abstracted masks. These clay masks are not traditional in appearance or functionality. They cannot be worn because they are sculptural forms. When building each mask, I do not have a predetermined outcome in mind. Instead, I work with the clay and intuitively layer elements. This process of building my masks was exciting, and the energy I received from creating them felt powerful. However, with this media, I shifted the focus from myself to the natural environment.

In *Abstract Mask #1* (Appendix, 7), I created a shield-like element by cutting a vessel

form in half. Then, I attached one half to the left side of another vessel that comprises the main structure of the mask. This shield is intended to cover or hide aspects of the mask underneath. I assembled this abstracted form spontaneously, layering elements of texture around the positive and negative spaces. I chose to use blue and green glazes to represent water and sky.

In *Abstract Mask #2* (Appendix, 8), the base is open and made from a thrown, wobbled vessel. This wobbled vessel exhibits folds and *throwing lines*. Throwing lines are the linear textures left by my fingers as I formed the vessel. I incorporated the rhythm of the folds and throwing lines in this mask. I also manipulated positive and negative spaces by carving out geometric shapes, and assembled these shapes to make multiple holes and openings suggestive of a fish-like form. In this abstract, sculptural mask I attached spiral eye-like forms with a diagonal nose-like piece. I chose a turquoise blue and black color scheme in my glaze for visual contrast and to suggest water.

In *Abstract Mask #3* (Appendix, 9), I started with a foundation of an open-ended thrown vessel which was cut in half and attached to another vessel. Then, I carved smaller sections from another piece of clay to create abstracted forms that I considered eye, nose, mouth, and ear elements. I attached these abstracted facial features to areas of the main supporting structure. These additional elements are positioned asymmetrically and protrude from the support. I built this piece by intuitively responding to the positive and negative spaces and I chose natural wood tones to refer to the forest. Even though I approached this piece abstractly, I realized that the finished mask looked anthropomorphic and seemed to want to speak. At this point, I found that I was spontaneously working through my process to reveal an obscure human-like spirit in this mask, perhaps my own.

In exploring masks through printmaking, painting, and clay, I have discovered techniques

for layering, painting, and building. My masks both reveal and conceal my identity and emotions, and sometimes they take on their own personas. Each mask is unique and tells a story. Of course, my personal story in the mask is abstracted and hidden to the outside world. However, viewers are invited to develop their own interpretation.

## **Conclusion**

I am grateful for all the knowledge, growth, and experiences I have been afforded in the MIS-IAR Program. I was privileged to participate in compelling courses where every element of art, from its history to its creation, was equally important. Now, I have the ability to broaden my students' artistic horizons. I am inspired to instill in them an appreciation for creativity, a willingness to solve problems, and an excitement for learning. I also look forward to continuing my own work, and further exploring my inner mask.

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## Appendix

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Figure 1. *Masked Creatures*, linocut reduction print with oil-based inks, 8"x8", 2011.



Figure 2. *Mask and Spine*, layered stencil resist print with water soluble inks, 22"x12 ½", 2011.



Figure 3. *Abstract Demon Mask*, layered stencil resist print with water soluble inks, 10"x10", 2011.



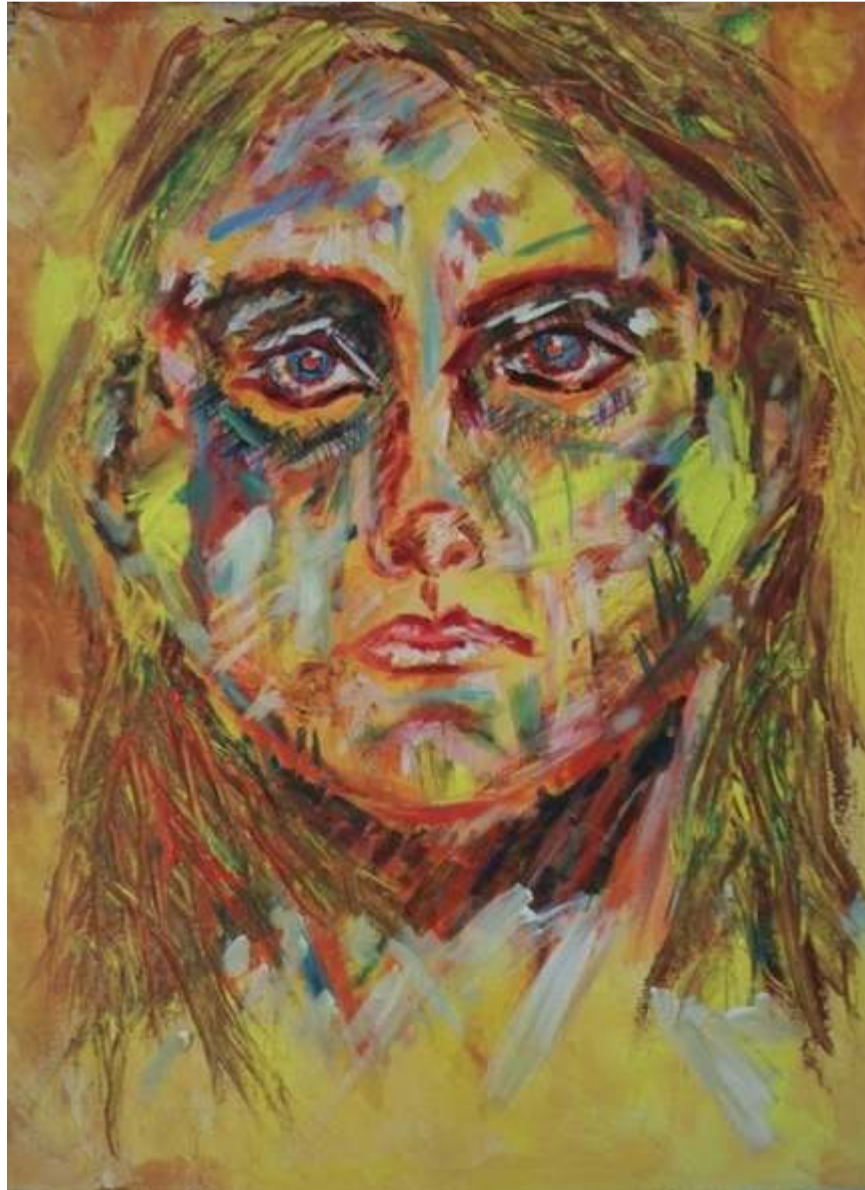


Figure 4. *Masked Self-Portrait of Focused Intensity*, acrylic on canvas, 24"x18", 2012.

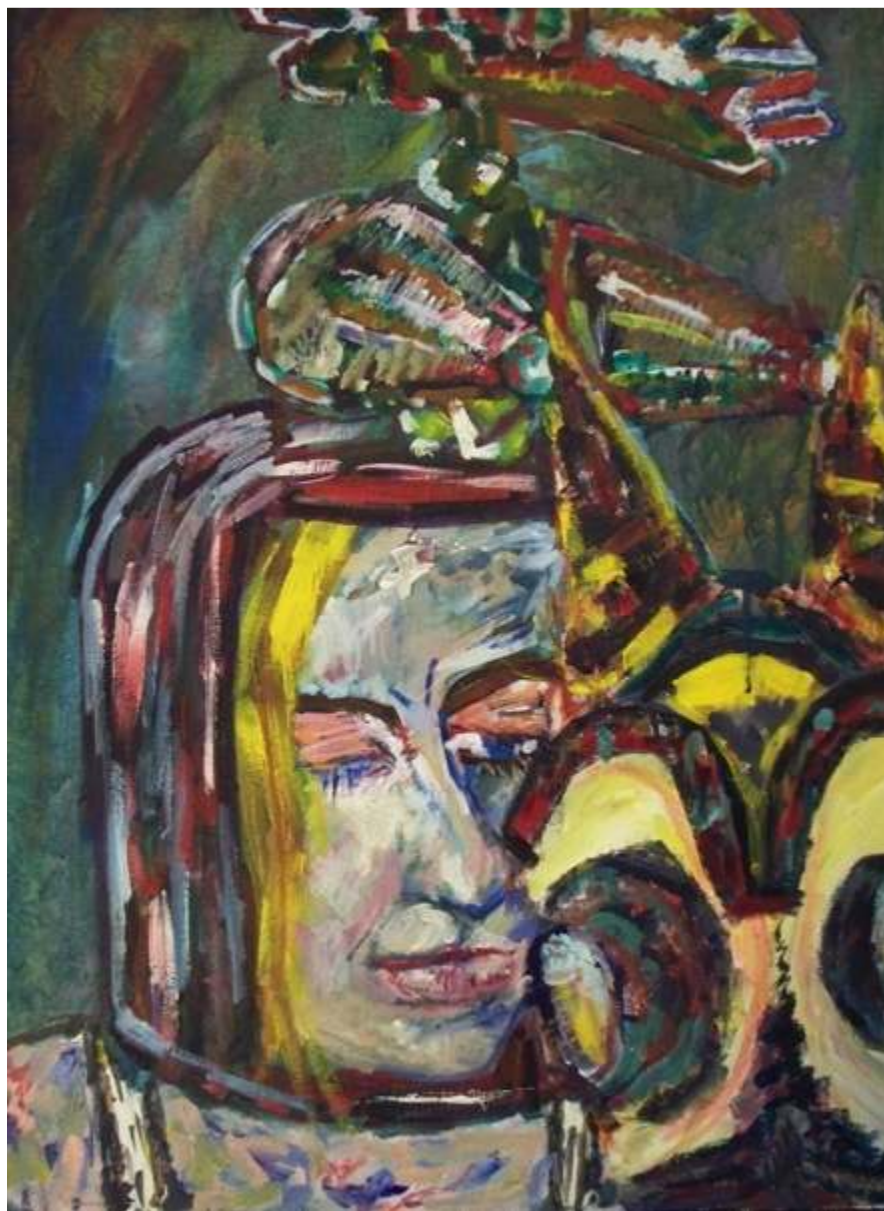


Figure 5. *The Masked Warrior*, acrylic on canvas, 24"x18", 2012.





Figure 6. *Ram's 2 Faces of Fragility and Protection*, acrylic on canvas, 24"x18", 2012.



Figure 7. *Abstract Mask #1*, porcelain high-fire clay, 9"x8"x7", 2012.





Figure 8. *Abstract Mask #2*, porcelain high-fire clay, 8"x7"x7", 2012.



Figure 9. *Abstract Mask #3*, porcelain high-fire clay, 8"x8"x8", 2012.

## Genevieve Ivan

### Education

2013 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art  
Virginia Commonwealth University  
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Crafts and Printmaking

2003 Bachelor of Arts  
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Art History  
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### Certification

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### Teaching Experience

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### Exhibitions

2013 **My Inner Mask**  
Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art Thesis  
Exhibition  
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA  
at Hylton Performing Arts Center  
Manassas, VA

2012 **Prince William County Public Schools Art Teacher Exhibition**  
Kelly Leadership Center  
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2011 **Prince William County Public Schools Art Teacher Exhibition**  
Kelly Leadership Center  
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